



**United States Department of Justice
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News Release

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Main player in Duluth drug ring pleads guilty to crack cocaine charges

The head of a Duluth drug ring pleaded guilty in federal court today to one count of aiding and abetting in the distribution of 50 or more grams of crack cocaine. Bernard Vann, 42, Duluth, entered his plea before Chief United States District Court Judge James M. Rosenbaum Dec. 21 in Minneapolis.

"This is serious business and this is a serious crime," Judge Rosenbaum told Vann, adding that the defendant will remain in custody.

Vann, along with 25 other members of a drug ring, were indicted in July 2007 following their arrests in and around Duluth. According to federal search warrants filed in the case, law enforcement in the Duluth area had been investigating a cocaine and crack cocaine distribution ring for the past two years. Vann, the owner of Hot Gear Cold Grills & Beauty Supply, located on First Street in Duluth, was the primary focus of that investigation.

The warrants stated that Vann was the head of the ring and the drug supplier for more than 30 distributors, and allegedly used his store as a front for criminal activity, including distributing the drugs. Investigators contend that during the past two to three years this drug ring has been responsible for the sale and distribution of 40-60 kilograms of cocaine and crack cocaine in the Duluth and Superior, Wisc., areas – making it one of the region's largest known drug operations to date.

Cocaine is a powerfully addictive stimulant that directly affects the brain, and crack cocaine is the free-base form of the drug. This form comes in a rock crystal that can be heated and its vapors smoked. The term "crack" refers to the crackling sound heard when it is heated.

To date, all of the other defendants have pleaded guilty to various narcotics charges, and all but one are pending sentencing.

If convicted, Vann faces a potential maximum penalty of life in prison and a \$4 million fine.

All sentences are determined by a federal district court judge.

This case is the result of an investigation by the Lake Superior Drug and Gang Task Force, the Duluth Police Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, with assistance from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Christian S. Wilton and W. Anders Folk.